

## Coming home to Minden Barracks: Historical site at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)

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### Abstract:

The Minden Barracks was a military barracks located in the town of Gelugor in Northeast District of Penang Island, Malaysia. It was operational from 1939 to 1971 and the site has since been decommissioned to accommodate the main campus of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). It has been almost fifty years since the regiments left the place, however, the memories of staying in the area are still being reminisced by the residents, hence, representing a convergence of heritage tourism whereby travelling to the destination to experience the place and activities that realistically represent the stories and people of the past. This paper depicts the initiatives taken by the librarians from the Malaysiana and Archives Division of Universiti Sains Malaysia Library to learn about the historical background of the campus by tracking the information sharing of the previous residents of the barracks on the social media. It has led to an outcome of getting some information about how the place used to be and an organized event of Oral history with one of the former occupants who keep coming back to relive the memories of Minden Barracks, to feel the connection with the place, and to share stories and experiences of a place once called home to families and friends.

Keywords: Minden Barracks; historical site; oral history; homecoming; heritage tourism

## **Introduction**

Pulau Pinang or Penang is an island about 12 miles long by 9 miles wide, two miles off the north west coast of west Malaysia. The State consists of the island itself and a strip of land on the mainland known as Province Wellesley or Seberang Prai. Being the first English colony in Southeast Asia and the furthest English East India Company (EIC) outposts in Asia, Penang was a frontier settlement whereby many years after the landing in 1786, its early history was one of struggle to prove that it could provide trade benefits and that its strategic location would enable the Company to secure the Eastern trade route.

Penang has a long histories of occupants starting from the earlier inhabitants, the Kedah Sultanate's ruling to the British colonization in the time of Francis Light and has been known ever since as one of the thriving city in the Federated Malaya. The settlements in Penang island grew into the port and trade post thus attracting traders and settlers from far and immigrants. In 1805 a writing by Sir Home Popham entitled A Description of Prince of Wales Island in the Streights of Malacca with its Real and Probable Advantages and Sources to Recommend it as a Marine Establishment, mentioned that:

*Under a consideration of all the advantages that Prince of Wales Island already appears to possess, I cannot but think it the best situation for a Marine Establishment and a Military Post.*

Under the British, in 1826 Penang together with Malacca and Singapore formed a single administrative unit called Straits Settlements which was administered by the British Colonial Office in India. Since then, Penang had been one of the places where the armies were stationed. There were few known locations of army camps in Penang namely Gelugor, Bayan Lepas, and Batu Maung among others. One of the famous army camps in Penang was in a rural area of Gelugor known as Minden Barracks.

## **Minden Barracks**

Minden Barracks was built before and after World War II and few of the structures remain today in a site of the now Universiti Sains Malaysia. The site of the barracks was formerly Glugor House, a plantation home of a wealthy Scottish family who owned the nutmeg and clove plantation in the area. The barracks saw few army battalions occupying the place. Prior to war in 1939 the British army converted one of the Brown's house to a barrack which was known as Glugor Barracks. The barrack then housed the 8th (Singapore) Heavy Battery of the Hong Kong and Singapore Royal Artillery. Imperial Japanese Army took hold of the barracks after the British withdrawal from Penang during the Battle of Malaya of the Second World War. After the surrender of Japan, the West Yorkshire Regiment re-occupied the place until 1948 and was put to use during the Malayan Emergency by the 1st Battalion of the Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry (KOYLI). It was stated in Federation Government Gazzette that Glugor Barracks will be renamed as Minden Barracks

from August 1, 1950 to honor the Battle of Minden, a 1759 battle of the Seven Years' War that saw the participation of 51st Regiment of Foot (the antecedent regiment of the 'KOYLI's').

In 1951, the barracks became the home of the 1st Battalion of the Manchester Regiment and in 1955 it was occupied by the 1st Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment until the decommissioning of the barracks in 1971. The place continued to house troops of the Overseas Commonwealth Land Forces (Malaya) including the 1st Green Jackets (43rd and 52nd) from April 1962 to December 1964 which became the 1st Battalion, Royal Green Jackets in 1966. Starting from 1965, the barracks also housed Military Maternity Hospital and the British Army Children School was also located there until 1971.

The list of the Units stationed in Minden Barracks from 1939-1971 can be summed up as in the table below:

Army Units	Year
8th (Singapore) Heavy Battery, Hong Kong and Singapore Royal Artillery	(1939–1941) re-designated as the 11th Coastal Battery, HKSRA in March 1941
1st Bn, West Yorkshire Regiment	(1945–1948)
1st Bn, Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry	(1948–1951)
1st Bn, Manchester Regiment	(1951–1955)
1st Bn, Royal Australian Regiment	1955 - 1971
2nd Bn, Royal Australian Regiment	
3rd Bn, Royal Australian Regiment	
1st Green Jackets (43rd and 52nd)	(1962-1964) became the 1st Battalion, Royal Green Jackets in 1966

The place which was operational from 1939, was being closed for good and handed over on March 31, 1971 to give way to the development of a new public University in the northern region of Malaysia, known as University of Penang and later known as Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM).

After the army handed over the last section of Minden (in the southwest) the Universiti shed virtually all traces of its past as a British military camp with the exception of the rifle range, the assault course, some storehouses and buildings. The transformation from the camp to the campus was carried out soon after the place being taken over from the military. Penang State Government enlarged the 285-acre campus by acquiring a 60- acre site adjacent to the University in the west. Minden's road system which had been designed to serve the needs of the British military camp,

were repaired, re-surface and widened and new subsidiary roads were built to service the schools and offices such as social sciences/humanities complex and the natural sciences schools.

## **Heritage tourism**

The historical sites, natural beauty of the island, the beaches and waving palm trees, cool Penang Hill with its scenic view make Penang a tourists' paradise. As for the University, the interweaving connections between the elements of the natural and the built environment in USM, with the timeless architectural heritage enriches the campus and impresses the hearts of those fortunate enough to be part of its charming surroundings. The uniqueness of the campus in comparison to other institutions of higher learning in Malaysia also lies in the sense of place where the history of the campus growth and development has given it a sense of character. As former British military camp, the developing campus inherited numerous elegant legacies comprising heritage buildings, green acres, majestic trees and garden with distinct colonial structure. It is also fascinating to witness various changes of sights and different moods generated within the locale of the structures and tales of different eras intermix in current settings.

Even though it has been almost fifty years that the site of former military camp was decommissioned to accommodate the Universiti Sains Malaysia and the regiments left the place, it was found that the memories of staying in the area are still being reminisced by the residents. The reminiscences could be found in social media, sites and news online that depicts the residents' experiences of coming back to the place that holds the memories of their pasts. Former Minden Barracks occupants kept visiting the places with their families and friends. Pages and sites were established to share about their travelling to experience the places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past. It appears that Facebook has been the common platform to be connected with people and sharing life stories and experiences. They even had a community, or a group called Malaysian Ex-British Army Association and Ex Far East Brit Brats to name a few.

This aspect of tourist interest in a place is known as heritage tourism. Heritage tourism has long existed and recently gained popularity due to demographic, social and cultural changes in the country or the place itself. Norhasimah, Tarmiji and Azizul (2014) wrote that cultural heritage can be seen in many forms including buildings, areas, dance, food, dress, events, values, lifestyles and handicrafts. In the case of USM, the people and tourists are often attracted to buildings of historical values with outstanding architectural elements which, according to A. Ghafar Ahmad (2012) usually demonstrate interesting aspects of a country's history and its evolving culture.

## **USM Librarians' Initiatives**

USM Librarians from the Malaysiana and Archives Division have been interested to explore more on the Minden Barracks history to find out about how the place used to be before it became the bustling University it is today. By tracing the history from the Internet, it proves that the place is still being visited by the former occupants of the barracks who narrated their stories of the place in the social media. To get further information on the number of foreign visitors who have visited

the University from the past years, the librarian also consulted few offices such as the University Museum and Public Relations Office for the record.

The memories of living in the Barracks remains in the hearts of the residents who came to visit the place with their family years after leaving the country. On one occasion, a former resident known by the name of Mr. Ivor Davies shared his photographs collection of Minden Barracks in the university's Facebook page. The librarian who noticed the post, contacted him. After exchanging few messages, more albums were shared to be kept by the Library. Mr. Ivor Davies was one of the occupants of the Minden Barracks from 1962-1966. He came to live in Minden Barracks during his teenage years when his father was stationed there. He claimed to have visited the place several times to relive old memories of Minden Barracks, to feel the connection with the place, and to share stories and experiences of a place once called home to families and friends. It turns out that Mr. Davies was planning to visit Penang again with his family in August 2018 and also willing to share his experiences with the present peoples of the Barracks. It was a breakthrough long awaited. The librarians quickly plan a program with him to get more information on his experiences of yesteryears in Minden.

With the arrival of Mr. Davies to Penang, USM Library managed to host a program on 20th August 2018, which comprises of an organized tour around campus, a mini exhibition and a talk. The tour around campus was video recorded and some information about the buildings, areas or places were noted. A mini exhibition of Mr. Davies photos and poems of Mindens Barracks were arranged for participants to get the feel of the place and sentiments expressed by Mr. Ivor Davies regarding his experiences during his talk. The talk "In MyLife: Ivor Davies @ Minden Barracks 1962-1966" was held at the Exhibition Area, Perpustakaan Hamzah Sendut, USM.

The session which could be considered as an oral history session lasted for more than 2 hours. It has attracted about 105 people who were interested to hear Mr. Davies reminiscing his experiences living in the Barracks during that time. He narrated about the condition of the place, life in the tropics and activities in Minden Barracks, about the buildings, especially his old house which is now the Campus's Post Office and the University's swimming pool which used to be the place for the armies to hold gatherings and socialized. He also relayed some facts on the area of the barracks, the floras and faunas, the local people whom they've encountered and their values. Mr. Davies mentioned that he really enjoyed living in Minden Barracks, considered it as home and the best times in his life. The talk was interesting because people realized that their working and studying place hold so much memories and is one of a historical place in Penang and Malaya. The event was considered a successful one as it attracted peoples from outside of USM, apart from USM staffs and students.

## **Conclusion**

The homecoming of one of the former residents of Minden Barracks has open the opportunity for the USM Library to get hold of the old maps of Minden Barracks and a number of architectural drawings of the old buildings of USM from the Development Office. Currently, work is being done to preserve and index the materials. To date, 150 architectural drawings which are of archival values have been indexed. It is hoped that the initiatives for preservation of historical and archival documents will benefit the researchers for future references on USM memory specifically and of the history of the nation generally.

USM is the second oldest public university in Malaysia and will be celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> year soon. There is a great potential in sustaining or moving forward with the wealth that comes from its environment. With the layers of history, USM has the prospect to be one of the hubs for historic tourism in Penang. The popularity of the place should be organized accordingly with the collaborations of several departments in USM which could contribute to researches, knowledge sharing and engagements with the society and future funding opportunities.

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